Vardan Mamikonian

(c. 387 – c. 451)

BRIEFING

Vardan Mamikonian (Armenian: Վարդան Մամիկոնեան; c. 387 – 451) was an Armenian military leader who led a rebellion against Sasanian Iran in 450–451. He was the head of the Mamikonian noble family and holder of the hereditary title of *sparapet*, the supreme commander of the Armenian armed forces. Vardan and most of his comrades died at the Battle of Avarayr in 451, but their sacrifice was immortalized in the works of the Armenian historians Yeghishe and Ghazar Parpetsi. He is regarded as a national hero among Armenians and venerated as a martyr and a saint of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Armenian Catholic Church. Vardan and the rebellion he led are commemorated in numerous works of art and literature. According to Arshag Chobanian, "To the Armenian nation, Vartan [...] is the most beloved figure, the most sacred in their history, the symbolical hero who typifies the national spirit."

BIOGRAPHY

Vardan Mamikonian was born in approximately 387 in the settlement of Ashtishat in the Taron region to Hamazasp Mamikonian and Sahakanoysh, daughter of Patriarch Sahak of Armenia. He had two younger brothers, Hamazasp and Hmayeak. He was educated in Vagharshapat at the school founded by Patriarch Sahak and Mesrop Mashtots. After the death of his father, he became the head of the Mamikonian noble family. In 420, he went to Constantinople with Mesrop Mashtots and was appointed *stratelates* (general) of Byzantine Armenia by Theodosius II. In 422, he returned to Vagharshapat, then went to Ctesiphon, where Sasanian king Bahram V recognized him as *sparapet* of the Kingdom of Armenia; the office of *sparapet*, the supreme commander of the Armenian armed forces, was held hereditarily by the Mamikonian family. Vardan retained this title after the abolition of the Kingdom of Armenia in 428.

Conditions worsened in Sasanian Armenia with the accession of Yazdegerd II in 439. At first, Yazdegerd and his officials imposed heavier taxes and obligations on Armenia and its nobility, but did not yet openly move against the Armenian Church. In 442, Yazdegerd sent the Armenian cavalry commanded by Vardan east to fight the Huns. In 449, the Sasanian king issued an edict officially imposing Zoroastrianism on Armenia. That same year, the Armenian elite gathered at Artaxata under the presidency of *marzpan* Vasak Siwni, Vardan, the *bidaxsh* of the Iberian March, and the acting Catholicos of Armenia to declare their loyalty to the Sasanian state and their Christian faith. Yazdegerd did not accept this decision and summoned the Armenian magnates (*nakharars*) to Ctesiphon and forced them to convert to Zoroastrianism. Yazdegerd released most of the nobles after an unexpected attack from the east and sent magi to convert Armenia.

Upon their return to Armenia, Vardan and most of the Armenian nobles repudiated their conversion, although Yeghishe and Ghazar Parpetsi give conflicting accounts of Vardan's initial apostasy and the origins of the Armenian rebellion that broke out in 450. Vardan may have initially intended to retire into exile, but soon emerged as the leader the popular rebellion against the imposition of Zoroastrianism. Vardan and his allies made a solemn oath and captured a number of fortresses and settlements. Vardan's forces won a major victory over the Persians in the summer of 450 and secured an alliance with the northern Huns; however, an embassy to Byzantium asking for aid was unsuccessful. Vardan was opposed by a significant pro-Persian party of Armenian nobles, and *marzpan* Vasak Siwni refused to follow him out of Armenia to meet the Persians in battle.

In the summer of 451, a large Sasanian army including the elite cavalry corps of the Immortals and war elephants marched against the Armenian rebels. Vardan's army battled with the Persians at Avarayr near Maku on June 2. The supporters of Vasak Siwni deserted during the battle and Vardan's forces were defeated, with Vardan and most of the Armenian nobility dying in the fighting. The aftermath of the Battle of Avarayr is not completely clear, but it appears that Yazdegerd, alarmed by the Persian losses, withdrew his troops and imprisoned Vasak Siwni. Vardan's surviving supporters were imprisoned in Iran, although many of them were eventually released in the following years. In 481, a new rebellion manifested under the leadership of Vardan's nephew, Vahan Mamikonian, which succeeded in securing recognition of Armenian religious rights and autonomy with the Treaty of Nvarsak in 484.

BATTLE OF AVARAYR

The **Battle of Avarayr** (Armenian: Ավարայրի ճակատամարտ, romanized: *Avarayri chakatamart*) was fought on 26 May 451 on the Avarayr Plain in Vaspurakan between a Christian Armenian army under Vardan Mamikonian and Sassanid Persia. It is considered one of the first battles in defense of the Christian faith. Although the Persians were victorious on the battlefield, it was a pyrrhic victory. The Armenians were allowed to continue practising Christianity freely.

The battle is seen as one of the most significant events in Armenian history. The commander of the Armenian forces, Vardan Mamikonian, is considered a national hero and has been canonized by the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Background

The Kingdom of Armenia under the Arsacid dynasty of Armenia was the first nation to officially convert to Christianity, in 301 under Tiridates III. In 428, Armenian nobles petitioned Bahram V to depose Artaxias IV. As a result, the country became a Sassanid dependency with a Sassanid governor. The Armenian nobles initially welcomed Persian rule, provided they were allowed to practise Christianity; but Yazdegerd II, concerned that the Armenian Church was hierarchically dependent on the Latin- and Greek-speaking Christian Church (aligned with Rome and Constantinople rather than the Aramaic-speaking and Persian-backed Church of the East) tried to compel the Armenian Church to abandon Rome and Byzantium in favour of the Church of the East or simply convert to Zoroastrianism. He summoned the leading Armenian nobles to Ctesiphon, and pressured them into cutting their ties with the Orthodox Church as he had intended.

The unsteadiness of the empire was ever-increasing under Yazdegerd II, who had an uneasy relationship with the aristocracy and was facing a great challenge by the Kidarites in the east. Yazdegerd II needed the cooperation of the aristocracy so that he could have an organized government to combat the external and internal issues endangering the empire. His policy of integrating the Christian nobility into the bureaucracy led to a major rebellion in Armenia. The cause of the rebellion was the attempt by his minister Mihr-Narseh to impose the Zurvanite variant of Zoroastrianism in Armenia. His intentions differed from those of Yazdegerd II. As a result, many of the Armenian nobles (but not all) rallied under Vardan Mamikonian, the supreme commander (*sparapet*) of Armenia. The Armenian rebels tried to appeal to the Romans for help, but to no avail. Meanwhile, another faction of Armenians, led by the *marzban* (governor) Vasak Siwni allied themselves with the Sasanians.

Battle

The 66,000-strong Armenian army took Holy Communion before the battle. The army was a popular uprising, rather than a professional force, but the Armenian nobility who led it and their respective retinues were accomplished soldiers, many of them veterans of the Sassanid dynasty's wars with Rome and the nomads of Central Asia. The Armenians were allowed to maintain a core of their national army led by a supreme commander (sparapet) who was traditionally of the Mamikonian noble family. The Armenian cavalry was, at the time, practically an elite force greatly appreciated as a tactical ally by both Persia and Byzantium. In this particular case, both officers and men were additionally motivated by a desire to save their religion and their way of life. The Persian army, said to be three times larger, included war elephants and the famous Savārān, or New Immortal, cavalry. Several Armenian noblemen with weaker Christian sympathies, led by Vasak Siuni, went over to the Persians before the battle, and fought on their side; in the battle, Vardan won initial successes, but was eventually slain along with eight of his top officers.

Outcome

Nine generals, including Vardan Mamikonian, were killed, with a large number of the Armenian nobles and soldiers meeting the same fate. The Sasanians, however, had also suffered heavy losses due to the resolute struggle by the Armenian rebels. Yazdegerd II dismissed Vasak Siwni and allowed religious freedom in Armenia. Although tensions continued until 510 when a kinsman of Vardan Mamikonian, Vard Mamikonian, was appointed *marzban* by Yazdegerd II's grandson, Kavad I (r. 488–531).

TREATY OF NVARSAK

The Treaty of Nvarsak (also spelled Nuarsak) was signed between the Armenian rebel leader Vahan Mamikonian and the representa tives of the Sasanian King of Kings (*shahanshah*) Balash (r. 484–488) at Nvarsak in 484.

Overview

The Nvarsak Treaty was concluded after the previous Sasanian *shahanshah* Peroz I (r. 459–484) was killed by the Hephthalites amid Armenian guerrilla efforts. This treaty ensured religious freedom and autonomy for Armenians.

The conditions of the treaty were as follows:

1. All existing fire-altars in Armenia should be destroyed and no new ones should be constructed.
2. Christians in Armenia should have freedom of worship and conversions to Zoroastrianism should be stopped.
3. Land should not be allotted to people who convert to Zoroastrianism
4. The Sasanian king should, in person, administer Armenia and not through deputies.

Following the treaty, Vahan Mamikonian was appointed as *hazarapet* and later *marzban* ("margrave") of Armenia. The Armenian cavalry led by Vahan supported Balash against the uprising of a pretender named Zarer (son or brother of Peroz).

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FAMILY

Vardan Mamikonian was the father of Vardeni Mamikonian, known as Shushanik, born around 439 AD. Shushanik married Varsken, a prominent Mihranid feudal lord (pitiakhsh). When Varsken took a pro-Persian position renouncing Christianity and adopting Zoroastrianism, he tried to force his wife Shushanik to convert as well, but she refused vehemently to submit and abandon her Christian faith, so she was put to death in AD 475 on her husband's orders. Shushanik has been canonized by the Eastern Orthodox Church and is venerated by the Armenian Apostolic Church. Known as Saint Shushanik, her feast day is celebrated on October 17.

LEGACY

Veneration

Vardan Mamikonian is as a saint of the Armenian Apostolic Church. He is also revered by the Armenian Catholic Church and Armenian Evangelical Church.

His commemoration day in the official Armenian Church calendar is usually in the month of February and on very rare occasions may fall in the first week of March. The actual feast day of Saint Vardan is a moveable feast, as it is on the last Thursday before Great Lent. Armenian churches named after him include the St. Vartan Cathedral of the Armenian Apostolic Church in New York City and the St. Vartan Armenian Catholic Church in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. There is also a St. Vartan Park near the cathedral. A segment of the Berlin Turnpike in Wethersfield, Connecticut is signed as the "Vartan Mamigonian Memorial Highway."

Knights of Vartan Inc. (USA)

The Armenian-American fraternal organization Knights of Vartan is named in honor of Vardan Mamikonian.